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C. Lynn Wells

Thief

My mother told me when I was twelve
that my father had killed a man in Vietnam
and cut off his ear because he knew that they believed
a soul cannot leave this world without a complete body.
He brought the ear back home and hung it on a string
like an ornament, took it with him when he left us.
He showed me his knife once, boasted
that he had smuggled it back. I could smell
the well-oiled handle, the blade
so shiny that I could see my weak, warped image.

Now I taste anger like blood, think of that man trapped
inside a broken body, straining toward the great
light of the sky. I imagine that withered ear
as it must have looked, hanging in our basement
amid tools and wilted vegetables in cracked mason jars,
rat turds dotting the dirty cement floor, gray
and white like marble. The skin would look ashen,
unreal, the hole in it small and violent, dried brown
like dirt, but not. I can feel myself inside
that man's clothes, each crease of sweaty camouflage
binding as I run from the noise and the smoke
and the death, then feel the tearing of a bullet,
for one gasping moment smell dank
green earth hard underneath my body.
I want to give it back, carry the ear, bleeding,
to that man and apologize, want to choke
on the smoke and run from the loud gnashing
sound of helicopters until I find him. I want to hold
his ear to the wet gaping hole, mend him, until I feel
him stop straining somehow, the sight of my two
tiny reflections disappearing as I close his eyes,
and his lashes lie dark against his skin.

SECOND PRIZE POETRY

C. Lynn Wells

Breaking Through

The silver-toned harmonica
(corn-on-the-cob great-grandad called it)
sets dull in my hands like the sound
of the earth that covered his coffin, landing
thud, thud and then no more. I blow on it now,
taste stale; the note fades but lingers in the air,
circling, like the crows over his barren land. The note
hums in this widowed farmhouse, cracked ceiling
like furrows in the forgotten fields, well-worn
carpet path leading through the house--the neglected
parts left to fade but not from footsteps. The accordion-like
note flits in my head, tickling my eardrums, and I can hear
the tap, tap of his shoes in tune with the joyful sour notes
and follow his tobacco-stained hands moving back and forth
as the sounds spout from his harmonica, each note hovering,
growing, bursting more brilliant than the one before.
I would imagine that the music leaked out the windows and fed
the corn in the fields, could hear their dry swaying
in time to our clapping. The din of his burnt-orange
chair as it creaked under his weight, the pained moan
of the cow as he helped her birthing
(the wet calf steaming in the crisp dawn air),
must linger over his barren land. I can inhale
his farmer's smell--sweet hay and tobacco--hear
the whisper-rustling of the leaves in the corn patch,
the strip of the husk when he showed me the corn inside--
ochroid kernels grown sturdy from puny green sprigs
in baked earth. He struggled when precious rain
came little and fought the crows to save the slumping
green stalks. Still he played his harmonica for me
("This is one ear the crows won't get!"),
and I blow on it once more, the notes breaking through
the staleness, like new leaves through dust.

C. Lynn Wells

Clean Out

The cancer hadn't chewed
dad to pieces so bad
that he couldn't take me fishing.
I was five and afraid
to hook the worm, to see the black blood
that oozed from the gash so he put the hook
through its end until it came clean out
the other side. -He'd toss my line
way out and tell me to hold tight to the pole
as the red and white bobber jerked urgently
on the black-green surface of the pond.
"Don't fight it, let 'er run!"
My pole arched tense with the weight,
like a bow pulled taunt. The thin
white line streaked madly through the water,
connected to some thing at the bottom,
and my arm breathed pain, raised blue veins
in my hands quivering like starving gills.
"Tug now, tug now!" he whooped, and the pond
ate my pole as if the water wouldn't stop
until it followed the fishline to me--then I fell
back with the weight of victory, wanting to see
the flopping dark goo on my hook but not wanting
him to stop cheering. I breathed quick to the pulse
of dad's words, "See, they always tire out!"

They always did, and we'd clean our mess
on the log by the shed to fix for dinner. Fish
scales clumped onto his knife like plastic sequins.
He'd cut the body in half with one broad stroke
and show me the paling pulsating heart shrinking
in the foreign light. Its wide eyeball was slick
and the meat gave way under the force of my finger.

Years later, when dad was forced to bed, his eyes
stared wet electric blue in gray sockets, hair
in patches like a small torn bird. His skin cracked
pale like the dried-out worms on our hooks, the black
bile in the pan by his bed smelled thick, chunks
of his lungs drowning in it. Wasted, he sank
in and out, but he gripped on like a person on the edge
of a precipice, half of his body dangling in the air
while hands grip earth. Plastic tubes and needles
ran into his body, and I could see him try to pull away,
could see him sinking into the bed--white sheets blending
with his white undershirt. He flinched at the sharp
points of pain, bubbling spit running from his mouth,
and, without knowing, I thought don't fight it.

C. Lynn Wells

At White Creek Farm

You choked the tractor
and came into the barn
so I could show you the rats
I thought were kittens. I cupped
them in my hands--their tails trickled
through my fingers, pulses beating
like rain. I held them like the water
you prayed would cover your crops.
You snuffed them under your heel, skulls
cracked like ice into liquid. You said,
babies or not, they were rats and rubbed
your feet across the floor, on some hay,
to clean them. As you walked across the field
the soles of your shoes sprayed mud.
The tractor belched and wrenched smoke,
earth-scent leaked in like stains on dirt.

FIRST PLACE FICTION

Cathy L. Silvers

Holes

I am standing at the end of a long, narrow pier, the first in an infinite line of dark figures extending single file behind me and disappearing into the sinking red sun. I look out expecting to see a vast ocean that stretches to the horizon, but instead, I see only a three foot round hole of water directly below my feet. Somehow I sense that I am expected to jump into the mud hole, but I am extremely afraid. I beg and plead for someone to go with me into the hole, and finally a man-figure steps forward to volunteer as my partner.

Without moving his lips, the dark figure tells me that I will need an oxygen mask and an oxygen tank. I put the equipment on, but there is no air coming through the oxygen tube. I start to panic, but the dark figure tells me to turn the knob on my oxygen tank to the number two. I turn the knob to the number two, and a stream of cool fresh oxygen fills my lungs.

The figure and I drop one at a time and feet first through the hole, and once submerged I can see that I am in an immense underwater cavern. It is not dark like one would expect, but it appears as if the cavern has its own firmament with a sun planted directly above us. I am looking up to see where the light comes from, and for the first time I realize that my partner and I are each connected to separate two inch wide ropes that extend through the mouth of the hole. I am reassured by the thought of being connected to something, anything, and I begin to feel freer to explore the cavern.

To my right there is an enormous dirt hill with all kinds of litter strewn through it. I move closer to the mound and am surprised to see that it is really a toxic waste landfill. I am considering the danger this discovery imposes on my partner and me, then suddenly there is a tremendous jerk on my rope. Anxious with the idea that my rope might become severed, I search frantically for the cause of the tension. I can see my partner struggling in the distance and then it dawns on me that our ropes are entangled.

My partner appears to be in some distress and I work frantically to untangle the ropes. We are both somersaulting over and over and plummeting deep into the dark, but after more than ten minutes of battle we somehow manage to untangle ourselves. I am exhausted and just trying to get my bearings, when I sense my partner beckoning me to explore the dark caves immediately below us. I want to go with him, but again I am thoughtful of my delicate rope. In my moment's hesitation, my partner goes on without me.

"What the hell you do all day besides sit there drinkin' my beer and smokin' my cigarettes?"

"It ain't your beer and it ain't your cigarettes."

"It ain't huh? Who do you think buys them then?"

"Don't fight with me, Wayne; I'm not in no mood to fight with you."

"You ain't in no mood to fight with me? Just what are you in the mood for then? I could use a little somethin' right now."

"Get away. You know I can't do nothing."

"You can't do nothin' or you won't do nothin'? . . . I SAID, YOU CAN'T DO NOTHIN' OR YOU WON'T DO NOTHIN'?"

"I can't. Now get off of me, you bastard!"

"Don't you call me that, whore!" Wayne grabbed his wife by the hair and yanked her head over the back of the couch.

"Let go of me, Wayne," Bernie pleaded.

"I ain't lettin' go until I get what I want, whore." Wayne yanked Bernie's hair even harder.

"Let go of me, you bastard," Bernie clawed at the top of Wayne's hand with her blood red nails, "or I'll scream."

"You scream then," Wayne shouted and he shoved the back of Bernie's head forward with such force that she landed on her hands and knees in front of the couch.

"Bernie, you alright?" Someone knocked from outside the apartment door.

"She's fine," Wayne yelled.

"Wayne, you hurting her again? Bernie . . . Bernie . . . you alright?"

"I said she's. . ."

"Yes, he's hurting me, Mary!" Bernie screamed. Wayne jerked Bernie up by her hair until her feet almost left the linoleum floor, then, with terrific strength, he held her like a limp doll as his right fist slammed across her left jaw. Bernie fell to the floor in a heap.

"Wayne . . . Wayne . . ." Mary shouted and pounded on the door at the same time, "You leave her alone, you hear me. You leave her alone. She's carrying babies."

I am in a luscious garden. The flowering trees and plants that surround me are so vibrant with color that they look like something from a children's picture book. The grass below my feet has the same color and texture as the moss that grows in the shadows of the enormous trees, and the large white boulders planted here and there among the flora give the effect of a stage setting rather than real life.

As I am walking along one of the plush green paths, I come face to face with two very small children. Upon closer scrutiny, I discover that the children are actually boy and girl twins. They pull and tug at my arms and I understand that there is something they want me to see. I follow their lead until eventually we come to a round mud hole that seems peculiarly out of place in the garden. The twins are anxious to jump into the mud hole but I tell them they must be careful about jumping into holes they know nothing about.

With the children one step behind me, I bend down to take a closer look at the hole. There is a layer of thick yellowgreen scum floating on the top. I use a stick to sweep the scum aside and find that the water underneath is still quite murky. I tell the children that it will be alright to look inside the hole, but we must only stick our heads in. The little boy and girl lie down on the dark green moss on either side of me, and we all three stick our heads in the murky hole at the same time. When we pull our heads back out again the little boy exclaims between sputters, "Why, there's nothing in there but stained glass windows!"

"I didn't want no damn girl. Why couldn't you killed that girl instead of killin' my boy!"

"I didn't kill him," Bernie spoke.

"Shit you didn't."

"Look Wayne, we've still got Trisha. Ain't she pretty? Don't you even want to come hold her awhile? Don't you want to hold your baby girl?"

"When you goin' back to work?"

"Real soon, Wayne. Mary already told me she'd watch Trisha for us."

"She did, did she? Well, I think I can be lookin' after my own kid."

"You! Ain't you going back to work?"

"Hell no, now shut up and throw me them cigarettes."

I am holding my young daughter's hand and we are taking a short-cut across the fields to my friend's house. It is summer, and the grass is dried yellow and brown. I can just see my friend's house when I begin to hear a faint cry. The sound is too familiar and it frightens me. I think about turning around but something seems to be drawing me to the house. The closer we get, the louder and more eerie the cry becomes. I take my daughter's hand, and we tiptoe up to the bedroom window and peer inside.

The only piece of furniture in the bedroom is a tiny twin bed with single sheet pulled across the mattress. A little girl is lying on her back on the bed, naked and crying. I can see a dark figure standing over the bed and he has something in
his hand. Suddenly, the little girl lets out a terrifying scream and I find myself screaming at the same time, "Run!"

I still have my daughter by the hand and we are running and running across fields, and there are thorn bushes and sticker patches and tumble weeds and barbed wire and holes, holes, holes everywhere! I keep running until I reach my own home and when I turn around my daughter is no longer with me. Fear, despair, panic and guilt overcome my consciousness and I think that I am going to faint when I see some people coming towards me carrying my daughter. The couple tells me that my daughter has stepped in a hole and hurt her ankle. I am mortified at the thought of being a bad mother, for not keeping my daughter with me.

"Hey, Wayne, where's your old lady?"

"Hell if I know. Shit, she don't never come home before midnight no more."

"No shit, man. I wouldn't come home either if I got a

busted nose every time I did."

"Shit."

"You got anything to eat?"

"Yeah, Trisha's got something fixed back there. Go ahead."

"Hey, Wayne, you say Trisha is home?"

"Yeah, she's back there somewheres."

"You mind if I pay her a little visit after I get me something to eat?"

"Do what you want, man, she ain't gonna bite."

"Shit, don't tell me that."

I am locked in a small square room that is completely empty. The linoleum floor is rotten and cracked and the plaster walls are yellow, cracked and full of holes. There is one small window on one of the walls and its wooden frame is decayed. The window glass is black with dirt and there is a large crack in one of the panes. Freezing winter air is blasting through the crack in the pane, but there is not a covering with which I can wrap my naked body. A woman enters the room through one of the walls and tries to fix the crack in the windowpane. I scream at her to stop because she doesn't know that the window has been cracked for a long time. I tell her that if she tries to fix the crack, the whole window will break. When the woman leaves, I very gently smudge a tiny see-through hole on the window pane. When I peer through, I can see the circle of a full red moon suspended in complete darkness.

"Aunt Mary, why did my mama go away?"

"She had to honey, that's all. Trisha ain't never had a chance here."

"But why didn't mama take me with her?"

"I think that's just what Trisha was afraid she might do, honey. I know your mama loved you more than anything though."

"Am I gonna see my mama when I get in heaven?"

"You sure will see your mama, honey. I just know Trisha is real happy now. I think she always wished she'd gone on with her brother anyway."

"What does heaven look like Aunt Mary?"

"Why, honey, it's like a beautiful garden."

There is a tall, white tower that reaches straight into the heavens. Millions of children are coming to the tower and they are all trying to climb it to reach the top. The tower is full with children when it begins to lean with the tremendous weight. Finally, the weight becomes so great that the tower starts to fall. Thousands of children begin to jump off, but I remain clinging to its side. In the split second before the tower collides with the earth I hear a little girl scream, "God save us!"

HONORABLE MENTION POETRY

Marta Tomes

Blaming Fate

I started to write something like:
"That night twenty years ago that . . ." and
I knew I might just as well have said "That, no, any night
day when I. . . or anything," or
"Thirty years ago when my parents . . ."
no "Fifty years ago when my grandparents
made love in a cornfield,
or robbed a bank, or met Churchill at an ice cream social . . ."

Marta Tomes

Testosterone: On Usage

I was eleven the time I opened
the barn door, startling the man belonging
to the white refrigerator truck. His
chambray shirt sleeves rolled back for work, he said
"You can't come in here now," embarrassed by
some sinister business with the cows. No
seed of impropriety there. Not like
Old Roger, ring in his nose, my dad sold
that year. When the red stockyard truck shuddered
and grunted up our hill, Old Roger, blithe
as a Liverpudlian soccer fan
at a Barcelona match, brought down cattle
chute and board fence and hired men, galloped through
tomato vines and rhubarb stalks before
planting himself in the far heifer lot.

Marta Tomes

Salvaging Along Highway 42

Stooped, in bibbed overalls like my father wore,
a burlap bag slung on his shoulder,
he pulls up cans and bottles
like plucking blackberries for a dead wife's cobbler.
He redeems them for cash, and keeps it in a Folgers can
to trade for kerosene, tobacco, soup beans--luxuries.
Little breath clouds rise and pass over his back
as I drive by. He waves and offers
a toothless grin. His knotty fingers grip
the crook of a cane; he is steady.

Should I say grace or dignity or peace
words for religion, I remember
he's no martyr, mere survivor we accord
little consideration save pity.
Wouldn't we all like to live as long
who strangely like our heroes mighty, young
and restless like James Dean
who spent a short while on the road
himself bent and gnarled?

Marta Tomes

Still Life

Beside the porcelain blue horse
beside the Chinese teapot
between the snake charmer and Hindi hand-dancer
a picture on the oak shelf
of four generations stands of them sitting
in a line on the edge
oldest to youngest of a bed.
The first one ninety-three the last one two
wear pigtails. The ones between
wear glasses. Uncle Joe perches in a tin-type
beside her bed on the table
young as a brother dressed for posterity
April 1917 beside the wavy black
beads of a sister her daughter
who's brought palm fronds holy water
and hand lotion that day.

Derek Mudd

Caged

I stand before the cage
looking into darkness
for I cannot see the cage's contents

Looking to the side of those
melancholy iron bars
I find a description of the beast within

Written on a plaque
over near the weeds
that have grown up all around

The beast, I read
is stronger than an elephant
Wilder, more uncontrollable than a wolverine.

And then I hear the growls
the longing to be free
I feel the tension flow over me like waves

The ferocity
the cantankerousness
the careening untamability

A multitude of keys
hang from the cold steel ring
in my hand

I root through them
searching for the right one
It takes me years to find it

But when I do
I insert, turn and stand back
I await the beast as I would await a lover.

SECOND PLACE FICTION

Carol Mauriello

Old

Mary O'Toole had missed the last six weeks of her painting class at Cromwell Center. She blamed the swollen foot which was propped up on the ottoman in front of her, an ace bandage wrapped carefully around it. Trying not to think about how much it hurt, Mary looked out the window of her third floor apartment.

Through the lace curtains of the living room window where she sat in a flowered wing chair, Mary could see a tanker making its way slowly up the Kill Van Kull. The vessel was so full and sat so deeply into its draft that only the top of what she knew was its hugeness was visible. A tug floated beside the tanker. Her eyes were not as keen as they once were and she had trouble focusing in on the name. She shifted her position in the chair. The arthritis in her back bothered her more each year.

"Old is no good," she said to Max and Bridgette, her two mutt cats. Both of them sat at her foot, the good one. "Don't get old!" She shook a gnarled finger at the sleepy cats. They both looked at the old woman. The gray tabby lay his head back down for a snooze. Bridgette, a fluffy white with Angora in her blood, jumped up into the woman's lap.

Mary patted the head of the cat absently. She lifted her eyes to the ceiling and sighed. "You were right to pass on early, Harry, before these things happened to you!"

She peered out the window again, lifting the lace curtain. Squinting at the sun through her wire rimmed glasses, Mary searched the side of the tug and made out the name, "Sarah Kay." She smiled, thinking of him. The sight of the tugs kept Harry O'Toole's memory alive for her. He had worked the tugs for thirty years; it was his life. Living in her four room Staten Island apartment, raising their three children, had been hers. Even when he had so unexpectedly been killed - an accident John Dune had said . . . .

Rough seas . . . He fell into the water . . . wheel grinding . . . The horror in John Dune's face . . . They said they never found his body, but she knew . . . Harry would have wanted a burial at sea anyway . . . his mutilated body was out there somewhere . . . floating . . . She overheard John's tearful words when he thought she

wasn't there, the sobbing liquor--laden confession she was not supposed to hear. All about how the wheel had chopped Harry's face off . . . .

They all said Captain John Dune was never the safe fun-loving, joking seaman after Harry's death. He never said a word about it to her, but Mary surmised the captain felt responsible for his cook's freak accident . . . John Dune was a heavy drinker; he probably would have become an alcoholic anyway.

After her husband's death, Mary O'Toole clung to her home and her Irish upbringing, seeing the last child, Dorothy, through St. Bernadettes, Martha through college with a teacher's certificate and then Tim through engineering school. The three of them had done well. They were all grown and she was proud of them. But now the tables were turned--Mary was the one who needed caring for. She was old, feeble . . . .

Leaving this building, this neighborhood, was going to be hard, but Mary knew that soon she would be forced to sever her last ties to Staten Island and what had been her home. If the choice were hers, she would die right here where she had lived with Harry and raised her children.

Not that it was all good back then. Harry was a drinker too, and sometimes he hit her when he'd had too much. But then all seamen were drinkers and they all took it out on their wives at one time or another. Her mother had given her to know those facts of life about men! Wasn't her own father that way?

The good part was that Harry was gone to sea for a week and then home for a week. Mary treasured the good memories with Harry O'Toole, but she was always happy to see him off at the end of the week, looking forward to her time alone--just her and the children, and then just her--to do the things she wanted to do without having to answer to a man, or to anyone.

But Mary's independence was drawing to a close. The neighborhood was getting bad and she was afraid to go out a lot of times, especially with the creeping arthritis in her back . . . Sometimes she even had to walk with that infernal cane! . . . .

Mary stared at the ebony walking stick her daughter Dorothy had given her. It was propped in the corner, not far from the chair. "As if I'm not getting old enough, my children are making me older by giving me canes!"

Bridgette purred. "Scat!" Mary said gruffly as she gave the

cat a gentle nudge. "I'm going to class. Enough of this pampering myself. I'll get out and get some fresh air." Mary felt better just having said it. "The walk will do me good," she said.

It was an effort to raise herself from the chair. Slowly, methodically she reached for the cane and hoisted herself up, being careful not to hurt the foot in the process . . . That wasn't so bad . . . .

Mary hobbled into the bedroom and removed the blue plaid flannel robe that covered her thin frame. Sitting on the bed she opened a drawer and pulled out a white sweatshirt that one of the grandchildren had given her. "I love my grandma" was scrawled in colorful crayon-like letters across the front. She pulled the top over her head and inserted her arms, one at a time, into the sleeves . . . The little nudges of pain were not significant enough to stop her . . . Very carefully Mary slid her good foot into a pair of red sweat pants, and then pulled the elastic of the other leg gently over the swollen foot. A heavy pair of woolen white socks would keep her feet warm.

The shoes were a problem but Mary finally decided on an old dirty pair of sneakers, which had been worn so much that they were stretched out of shape, but flexible enough not to cause her foot too much pain. Lacing the shoes took a long time. Her fingers did not want to bend to her will, but finally it was done.

Mary stood up, pleased with her progress. Her eyes fell upon the book that lay on the end table beside her bed. She had not opened it to read yet. There was time for that. She had heard about it on the news. Curiosity more than anything else made her buy it, she told herself. But she *had* bought it after all, hadn't she? Dorothy would have a fit if she knew. She must remember to put the book in the closet before Dorothy's visit.

Mary tensed, thinking about the one thing Dorothy always talked about-going to live with her and her family in New Jersey. Mary could not think of anything she wanted to do less than leave this cozy little apartment and live in the suburbs with her daughter. She would completely lose her freedom, her independence, her life.

Here, in the city, Mary was happy . . . if not for the pain here and there. And the cold winters . . . She dreaded the cold. Her old bones could not take the harsh winters much longer.

"Where could I walk to in the suburbs?" Mary asked Max, who jumped up on the dresser and lay across the white doily,

covering it with his long gray body. Mary sighed but decided against swatting the cat. "There's no place to walk to except round and round the circle of the development," she complained to the cats. "I'd go absolutely stir crazy. No stores at all. Just a lot of roads going to shopping centers. I don't want to go there," she said with finality, slamming a fist down on the dresser and startling the cat. "When the day comes and I can't take care of myself, then . . . Well . . . I'll think of something."

Once Mary was dressed, she peered at herself in the mirror over the dresser. Always as a precaution, she smiled before she allowed herself to actually examine her face in the mirror . . . It was hard enough looking at the old wrinkled prune she knew would be reflected there, much less at one that was frowning . . . .

Quickly Mary ran a brush through her silver hair, which was still threaded with gold but not so thick as it once was. She pulled the hair into a top knot and fashioned it into a bun . . . It hurt to hold her arms above her head but she grimaced and continued until it was done . . . Harry had always objected to short hair and, even after his death, Mary still kept her hair long, out of habit she guessed.

"Just a touch of color, Mary O'Toole," she said to the old face in the mirror. "You look like you haven't seen the sun in a month of Sundays!" She applied a light lipstick to her thin lips and, just for the heck of it, she smeared a touch of light blue shadow on her eyelids. Her eyes were still large and blue. "Do you think I look like an old whore?" she said to the cats, cackling. Max perked an ear at her question. "Oh, what the hell," Mary said and she picked up a slender wand from the worn makeup bag and, opening the tube, applied a brown mascara, which had become caked with age.

"Foolish old broad," she said to herself. "Who do you think you're going to see at the Center? Errol Flynn?" she chuckled. "Maybe Fred Astaire? . . . Gary Cooper?" It was a moment or two before she turned to the cats lying on the bedspread; "They're dead. They're *all* dead."

From the closet, Mary removed a square wooden paint box with a brass handle; the carrying case was old and nicked. And then, farther back behind her shoes, she reached in and felt for the medium sized canvas on which she had begun a still life. Norma Jean, the art teacher, was quite pleased with Mary's progress. Mary was no Van Gogh, but once, before she had dropped out of high school to marry

Harry O'Toole, then such a handsome young devil, Mary had dreamed of becoming an artist. Then after the children came and there was so much to do . . . .

Now of course it was too late, but it pleased Mary to try painting flowers and large bowls of fruit. She loved the smell of oil paint and turpentine, and the splashes of color she created always lifted her spirits--for a while at least.

Before she shut the light in the room, Mary's eye again rested on the book on the nightstand. Its dark cover and its two word title in large print drew her back across the room. She sat down on the bed, the book in her hands. She opened it randomly to a page and read what was printed there. It talked about drugs. Mary closed the cover quickly and hid the book in the closet, where Dorothy was not likely to see it.

Mary was sure she would not need the cane to walk but she would take it anyway, just in case her foot started to throb and the walk became too much for her. Even though it was only a couple of blocks, Mary worried about the distance. . . .

What if the elevator were broken? . . . She had not been out of the apartment for several weeks. Dorothy and Tim and his wife had been so solicitous of her since she fractured the foot, Mary had not even had to go to the grocery.

So that she would not have to carry a pocket book, Mary pinned a coin purse inside her sweat pants by the elastic waistband. She was wise to the neighborhood hooligans. If those kids who roamed in the gangs saw she carried no purse, they'd figure she had no money. And everybody knows sweat pants have no pockets.

In the hallway, Mary closed the door of Apartment 3G behind her and headed for the elevator. She hooked the shiny black cane on her arm and limped to the elevator door where she pressed the "down" button, leaning heavily against it. The door to the cubicle opened with a clank and Mary entered the empty elevator. Inside she wrinkled her nose at the smell of Mr. Cooper's cigar smoke. Cooper lived on the fourth floor, and she could always tell when he had been in the small closed space. Mary hated the smell of cigars but the old man didn't seem to care that it bothered anyone.

Mary couldn't wake up from the dream. She tried and tried to hold her eyes open but again and again she would drift back . . . and she dreamed about it over and over again . . . .

The boy's head was bloody. He was young. Maybe twelve.

She felt the cane in her hands as she swung it, felt the impact on something hard, a cracking, a thud. It was a reaction, only a reaction . . . What had she done? He was only a *boy*.

It was late when she returned to the building. Dark. The foot had swollen to twice its size. Someone had convinced her to wait for the bus. Young boys. She saw their shadows. Someone grabbed her from behind. She dropped the paints and the canvas. The wooden box sprung open and tubes of paint and brushes splayed over the sidewalk. Anger, not fear, seized her. "Hooligans!" she yelled. Her bony fingers wrapped around the cane tightly. Mary turned and swung. The boy was on the ground . . . The others ran . . . She didn't remember any more.

Dorothy's voice faded in and out . . . Tubes in her nose . . . White sheets, white walls . . . A hospital . . . She slept.

"Mother," Dorothy's face was grave.

Mary finally opened her eyes with some effort. Her body was bruised from the fall, but she guessed she was all right. "The boy?" Mary said. "Did I hurt the boy? Did I . . ."

"Mother, what is *this?*" Dorothy held up the book accusingly.

Mary didn't answer.

"You know you're not going back to that apartment--to that neighborhood, mother? You're coming home with us. This is just the final straw. We should have done it years ago. You could have been *killed.*" Dorothy shuddered. "And now *this*!" She held the book for a moment and then tossed it into the waste basket. "I can't believe you'd even consider such a thing. *Final Exit*. "Indeed!" she scoffed. "You're going to be all right and you're coming home to live with us in New Jersey. I'll not hear another word about it."

Mary turned her face to the window. "The boy," she said softly.

"Oh, he's all right," Dorothy said. "You didn't hurt him. Just stunned him for a while. You should have just given them your money, mother. Those street gangs are taking over the city--"

"I want to go home, Dorothy," Mary announced. "Where are my clothes?"

"Now, mother. There'll be no more talk about it. Ralph has already removed your clothes from the apartment, and we'll be moving the furniture at the end of the week. You'll have to decide what you want to keep and what you want to get rid of. And those

cats. We can't keep those cats. We already have a dog and--"

"I don't want to get rid of anything, Dorothy. Including Max and Bridgette. What right have you to move all my things? To tell me what I'm going to do?" Mary challenged. "I want to go *home.*"

Dorothy sighed. "We'll talk about it, dear." She touched her mother's arm affectionately. "I have to go now. See you tomorrow." Dorothy leaned down and kissed her mother's cheek. She was out the door before Mary could utter another word.

Mary stared thoughtfully at the hospital room door. After some time, she edged her legs over the side of the bed and raised herself up to a sitting position. She removed the tubes from her arm, flinching as she jerked each one loose. It took some doing but she finally managed to get out of the bed and hobble to the chair that was put there for visitors. Once in the chair, Mary reached down inside the waste basket beside it and retrieved the book. There wasn't much time. She read and read as if her life depended upon it.

FIRST PLACE ART

T. Nannette Amsden

Mystery State II
(monotype)

SECOND PLACE ART

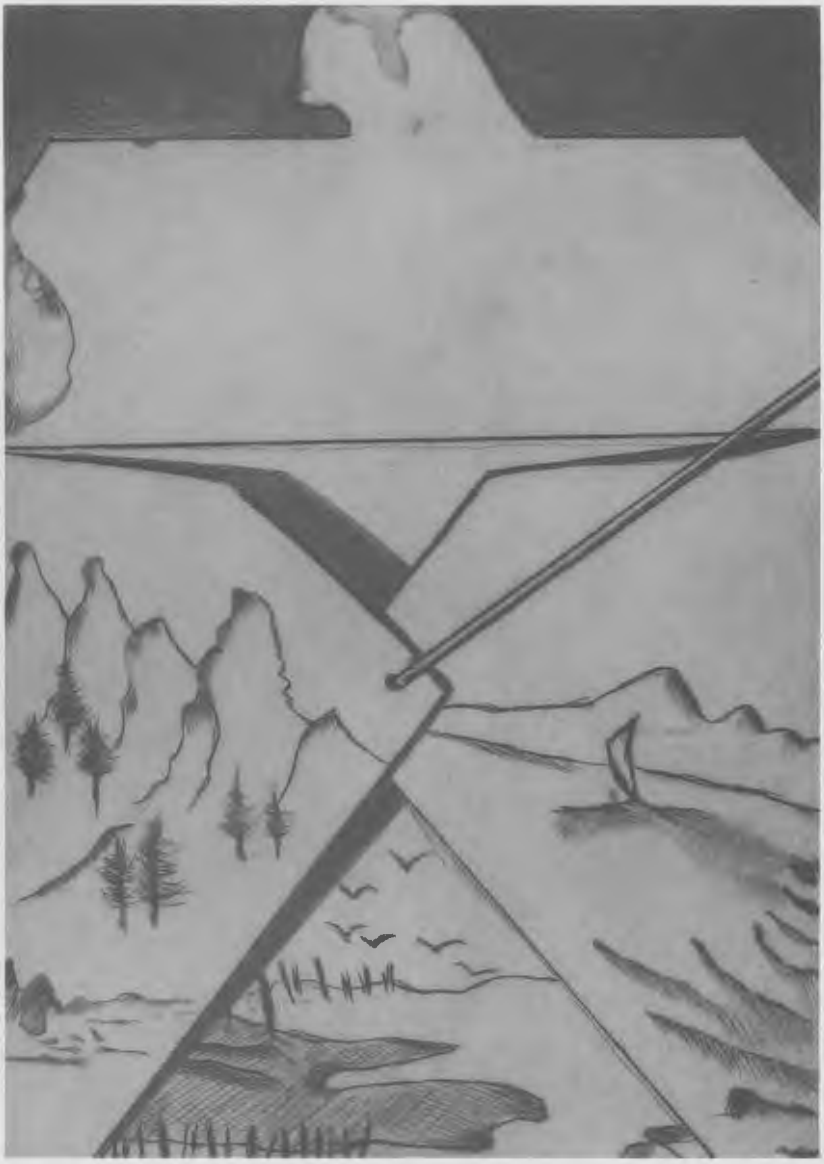
Anthony Wolking

Untitled
(tushe lithograph)

HONORABLE MENTION ART

Cynthia C. Osborne

Sichuan
(drypoint)



Candice G. Fisher

Self Portrait
(collage)

Janena Greenhill

Motion
(lithograph)

Untitled
(photograph)

Tim Holbrook

Untitled
(ink)

Michael Huff

Alison Blair

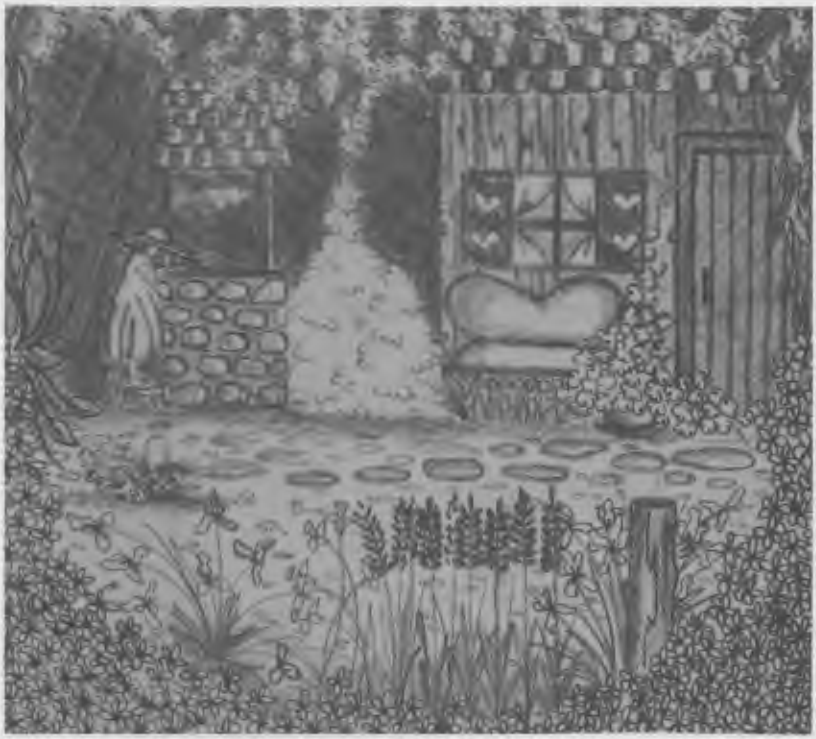
Pooch Smooch
(photograph)

Catherine Raymer

Untitled
(collage)

Rebecca J. Halsey

Springtime Wishes
(crayonstone lithograph)



Mark Davis

Latino Crosses

I wonder how Latino men decide
to make their crosses
and Christs from wood.
With their bright and flat colors in the grain,
foreshortened, squat and ugly carpenters,
garish red on this knotting curates hands,
open break of legs with knurled genitals,
flesh mortified by long ascetic days.
These crosses are not of shiny silver,
not a doctor's office doddering Christ,
but a cross made to fill and shame a room.
These men knew Christ more than our local priest,
and they knew Christ could sweat and piss and ache.
They made adolescent days more kind
by making crosses out of wood that scarred.

Mark Davis

Specimen

Between two fingers I can hold the femur
from this leftover turtle, a left
broken hip. I picked it out from the dry shell
in the dry lake, picked it out
from the black beetles and sandrocks,
the sole remnant of the picked over interior.
I took it to my home and brushed
its dry smoothness clean
the soft bristles seeking out
the ball and socket holes.
Left to rest on a book
it was dry white again, rolling smooth,
its thin, brief length
coming into a bulking crest, the heavy loop
making it a short club to be struck
on a very small enemies soft head,
but sitting so brittle next to my hand
it has lost its purpose.
No legs to move it home,
the heavy, shelled back is the slowest of mobile homes.
Sent empty, with no resident in tow.

Mark Davis

Walden Between

Sitting in the city's first restaurant
a bored boy watches out the windows,
where, between dumpsters and pavements tomatoes grow.
Studying the ways and means of the hands
and hairy white chest that waters these plants.

He has found a way of remembering
the aurora boreality of the cigar
and the smooth plasticity of the cheap, green
sprinklers and soil bags the fat man carries.

The big breasted man
kicks the dry, white dog turds
from his Walden between winters,
The wilderness where
between dumpsters and pavements
tomatoes grow.

Todd King

kwashiorkor

The trees bend toward the smell of rain,
and I sit under them looking for the clouds.
I am three wishing I had a tail to wave
these flies away. Momma don't say nothin'
about how I lay under the trees so long
it burned shadows in my skin, or how the sun
got me so hot my hair turned red
like fire. My insides creak.
Momma says it sound like a breaking branch. She rocks
my brother in her arms, tells him to kiss it
all away. She cries when my little brother sucks,
and looks at me. She sings about don't worry,
about how one day I'll get to ride
a winged zebra across the Great Desert to a place
where the people are pale from eating clouds.
My stomach is round, and grumbles loud enough for the trees
to hear. Maybe a brother burst outta me,
and we could shake these trees,
until our sleep falls like leaves.

Todd King

Webber's Sausage, Inc.

The babies crawl up ramps to sliding doors,
goaded by the cattle prods of two men,
whose galoshes strain against the sucking
mud of dirty diapers. The line shrinks one
by one, infants with knees scraping concrete,
slowly slink into the mouth of this cold
atrium, and oh the greeting they get.
Figures loom in here, shapes with calloused hands
that shove soft fatty faces in a muzzle.

Since this food is one or two years old,
it cannot speak the language of the dark,
until the straps are just one notch tighter,
then their throats are straining out intense squeals.
It is all music until the button
summons the machine to hiss and dismiss
the sudden bolt between their eyes, the blood
falls like wet shavings from the sharpening
of pencils. This is called knocking my friends.
There is the sound of a palsic body
nervous in its stall, a hole in its head.

The gods are giving rooms to children now,
while we hang meat from its heels and push it
through doors, the mud and blood sprayed down the drain.

Todd King

on being sent to his room

If I were a giant I could throw
a twenty year old pine tree through your heart,
Make you buckle over dead, make you trip
over your own feet and stumble
into this enormous green trash bag
I've been saving for just this occasion.
I don't want to take out this trash,
unless its you, then I'll make sure
I put on my tee-ball cleats, and stomp you hard,
like mom smashing round steak with a tenderizing
mallet, I need to make sure that the lid fits good
or else the big dog that slobbers
will come over and get in,
rip it to shreds, spread it all over
for guess who? me to pick up,
and I can't have father
all over the back yard. You're not worth the trouble.

Todd King

glass eater

Blood and spit flow down my chin,
across the crags of pubescent scars,
the pitting of acne that wants
its mouths filled. Here's to hunger . . .
spitting teeth with the gnashing of glass-
goblets, shot glasses, Coke bottles, eyeglasses,
mirrors that glare pain, all down,
travelling on an esophageal trek.
You are all hidden within my guts,
the taunting facets of my reflections.

With the folding of the clouds, the rain
comes, spitting on my face,
pooling in puddles, and there he I
is am. I drink, and I drink to flood
it all away, the red scars running
down my chin . . .

Todd King

summertime rolls

The trailers line up like a fleet,
the Spanish armada, as we laid on the deck of a fallen
tree waiting to plunder those ships of the enemy--
Mr. Gabrielson, who always yelled
because our noisy games reminded him of his age.

The wind had died, so we took our turns walking
the planks of our tree-ships branches,
one, two, step-diving into the calm
field of grass, our Mediterranean,
swallowed by the tangle of stems,
scaring the grasshoppers, a rush of flying
fish fearing a sea monster.

The sheets on the clothesline
took in a deep breath, filled sails,
as we clammered to our positions.
The ocean rippled and crested
steering us toward the fleet
one, two, aim, fire,
as we hurled rocks--cannonballs
toward ships, sea monsters, Mr. Gabrielson,
who did not seem to know that it was not us,
but the pirates in our soul, that wanted him gone.

Rachel Short

Mr. Mort

A blonde boy with a raven on his shoulder was an unusual sight in such a small town, so many people stopped to stare. The boy kept walking. He looked straight ahead in that quick, deliberate way peculiar to those who had a very important job to do.

Mr. Mort, who ran the only barber shop in town, stuck his vein-roped neck out the door and showed his few teeth. He hated kids. Sometimes, when he was cutting some young, tender brat's hair, he would look longingly after his straight razor, flat and straight and clean, and wonder what it would look like, blood running from it to his clean tile floor. The boy's mother would suddenly look up and notice Mr. Mort's pulse throbbing unnaturally in his neck. More than one woman had taken her son out before the haircut was complete, stammering about burning dinner and holding their child very tightly. They brought their families to him less frequently now, which suited him just fine. He much preferred to cut a grown man's hair. A grown man's heart held darkness, and it pleased Mr. Mort to be able to feel that tremoring in their thinning hairs. It made him feel less alone.

Mr. Mort lived in the center of town in a house with a bright red door. There were two restaurants on either side, but they just stayed open until seven o'clock. The other businesses, a loan office, a drugstore, and a slick-haired attorney's office closed at five o'clock, just as the doves started to settle into Mr. Mort's attic with annoying burble-coos. By living in the center of town, Mr. Mort was away from people during the night. Most folks built houses on the green fields past Mrs. Parker's farm supply store, and had no reason to be in town after dusk.

The only person who lived within two miles was the attorney across the street. Mr. Mort saw him sometimes, standing in the light of his apartment window above his office. The attorney was a quiet man with thick eyebrows and a lean body. Peggy Capslock had disgraced her family by throwing herself at him, trying to seduce him with short skirts and midnight legal consultations. She was young, so it worked, and he slept with her one night. Immediately afterwards, he told her to leave and never come back. Peggy still

gave him deep blue glances when they passed on the sidewalk, but he never could look at her or speak to her again.

In the community, he was well respected. His legal advice had kept many farming families from complete bankruptcy, and his rates were reasonable enough to keep him in his two-room apartment. Peggy Capslock hated him, of course, but her family didn't blame him for Peggy's actions and shame. He had saved the entire Capslock family from starving one winter by helping them get a government farm grant.

Mr. Mort hated him, too. Once, ten years ago, some brat had pushed his thin tolerance to the limit. It was a cool, dark June evening, like this one was turning out to be. A city official had come by the shop that day and pleasantly asked that Mr. Mort *not* sweep his hair cuttings onto the sidewalk. Mr. Mort pleasantly agreed, all the time imagining the official's fat, pompous head cracked against his precious clean sidewalk. Let the city foreman sweep *that* up in the morning.

Seven minutes after the man left, Mr. Mort closed the shop early and went to his house, his temples throbbing hard enough to bring tears to his eyes. He had sat motionless at his splintery kitchen table until dark.

A boy had knocked on the door. He asked for a drink of water. Mr. Mort had brought him in, smiling and nodding his scrawny head. He had most of his teeth then.

Mr. Mort had intended to let the boy go on his way as soon as possible so he could sit again, well into the night. When he handed the boy his glass of water however, and smiled into his eyes, the boy jumped and his eyes widened.

"Mister . . . mister . . . ."

"What is it, boy?" Mr. Mort touched the boy's shoulder. The boy blinked and moaned as if he were in deep pain. He stared into Mr. Mort's sharp grey eyes.

"So dark, Mr. Mort," the boy whispered slowly. "You're so *dark.*"

A week later, a memorial service was held for little Timothy Hawkins, nine years old. "He always had a way with animals," his mother wept. It was always assumed that a mountain lion had found him alone in the woods. The coroner knew blade wounds when he saw them, but the Hawkins boy's grandfather had taken him to court long ago over a land dispute, so he let them believe what they would.

Mr. Mort hugged the grieving mother against his bony chest and wished her all the best.

After he had cleaned his razor, changed clothes, and taken the body out to the woods in three Nu-Hair boxes, he had gotten nervous. Although the shades were drawn when he had done it, and the boy had been silent, and nobody looked twice at old Mr. Mort taking trash out to the dumpsite in hair tonic crates, he felt like the attorney knew what he had done. When he raised his shades at three o'clock in the morning after the incident, the attorney's light was on across the street and he was silhouetted in the window.

Mr. Mort about shook to death every time he would pass the attorney on the street. The attorney's thick eyebrows would go up in a casual acknowledgement, no more. Even so, it was a year before he stopped being jumpy.

For ten years now, he cut mostly men's hair. Most boys in town had mother-induced bowl haircuts. The attorney still lived across the street, but next door to his office instead of above it. It was a nicer place for his new wife.

Mr. Mort had never lost control again with any townsfolk. He always saved up for the next traveling salesman, the next wanderer or cross-country hiker. He was cautious about these. He would take them to the next county instead of the neighboring woods.

The boy with the raven walking down the street seemed vaguely familiar to the old man. He clenched his knobby fist and went back into his shop, refusing to watch him any longer. Right behind him, the boy walked into the shop. He was blonde. The bird on his shoulder matched his eyes, dark

(so dark, Mr. Mort)

and he was young, about ten.

"Can I help you, son?" Mr. Mort grated. One other customer, chronically red-faced Mel Tilbert, looked over his paper.

"Maybe you can, sir." The boy smiled darkly.

"Need a haircut, boy?" Mr. Mort eyed the slightly shaggy blonde hair. The last light of day coming in the window seemed to *brighten* the boy, make him seem so light next to-his bird. Can't work you in today. Maybe next week."

"No. No haircut. Just like to talk to you, Mr. Mort." He turned to the red face peering over the paper. "Please leave us, Mr. Tilbert." Mr. Tilbert's mouth stayed open for a moment. He wanted to argue. He hadn't gotten his hair cut yet. But something in the

cold way the boy's eyes matched the raven's made Mel Tilbert calmly fold his paper, nod to Mr. Mort, and walk out the jingling door. The boy walked closer to Mr. Mort. The raven turned its shiny black eye up to the old man. The boy was all dark smiles. Mr. Mort could hear him breathing.

Mr. Mort squinted. "Do I *know* you, boy?"

The attorney had watched the boy enter the shop. He smiled because he had recognized him. He lit a cigarette and stood by his new window, just across from the shop, until it was dark. His pretty wife was gone to her sister's house. The door of the barber shop stayed shut a long time after Mel had walked out, and soon, the fluorescent bulbs went out, one by one. The attorney still stood, watching, until his wife was back from her visit. They ate a late supper, then made love in the dark, and while she slept across the room, he stood and looked out the window an hour longer. He lit another cigarette. The moon was full. Everything was heavy and silver.

Soon, uneventfully, a large bird flew from the back of the black barber shop towards the moon. Smiling, the attorney went back to his wife.

The next day, it was funny how no one really remembered who the town barber had been.

Terry C. Lewis

The Whipping

A prime buck
in tattered home spun britches,
his back bared like a turned field
before the sowing,
it is his strength
and Master's value,
broad, smooth, and shiny
black uncut by cat-o-nine-tales,
spread across the Live Oak
on cabin row
about to be made
example of for all
as overseer
grips the whip handle
with a gloved hand.
This scene--from many white family
stories, best-selling books and
TV miniseries--wants to say
the blacks were so
silly-happy it didn't matter
and reports exaggerated
by abolitionists--
it never really happened
like that.
I can only think
it was that and more:
the man's young son shielded
behind the cotton wall
of his Momma's skirts,
seeing his Papa's shame.
There must have been Whites
whose aristocratic ignorance
was cut at the crack
of the whip or the holler
of the slave. But all that's

read is the business-like
correcting of behavior
of a slave who tried
to run to freedom north,
his back becoming striped--
a part of him,
as fellow slaves watch
and overseer's forehead
beads up with sweat.

Samantha Dunaway

Holding

This ring? She asked holding out
her little finger. When I nodded,
she twisted it off and put it on the table
between us. I waited until
she picked it up between two fingernails
like something dirty, strange to hold
it away from her skin, already red
from its grip. Then she handed it to me,
dropping it into the center of my palm.
It was a silver band made of a chain
that had been braided around itself until
it was wide enough to cover
the space from knuckle to knuckle.
I ran my finger along the edge,
rough from a bad soldering job,
and peered through the center at her.
She played with her other rings,
moving them from finger to finger.
Did someone make this? Her turn to nod.
She was looking at the window, rain
beating against the thick glass, nothing to see.

Jenny Young

Night Drive

My son's asleep against the greasy door
that keeps him safe inside my Chevy truck.
My Craigo don't know I beat his mama,
despite red lights, to pick him up but God
he squirmed happy watching me roll around
the pre-school driveway, where the aide can't see.
It don't matter that she'll tell Barbara
I've got Craig. The bitch'll be puffing down
a Vantage and bawling in no time. Poor
woman thinks I'm changing oil at Flem's place
in Tennessee but these treads will grind north
75 far beyond Columbus,
where teachers and neighbors don't bother men
with questions about their sons. I'm lucky my
boy keeps cryin', stopping the sleeping
that wants to come. Gotta gas up and wipe
his nose; can't have a runny nose tonight.
Good thing second graders need working dads
instead of sorry women who get back-seat
pregnant with men like me in cars like this.

Lisa Conrad

Talking To God

trying to shake it
shaking off depression like water
give me five minutes or so
clutched in a tight ball
rocking, nursing, my bruise
ow, I scraped my knee
I suck the burned finger
huddled, freezing in the august heat
come share this with me
stroke my hair
kiss away my tears
bandage my heart
cover me
with your big, soft, warm hands

Inscape Staff Spring 1992:

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Fiction: Karen Osborn, University of Kentucky
Art: Carrie Peterson, Morehead State University

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